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lessons learned brief

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Iraq Local Governance Program

Creating Representative Councils in Baghdad

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in March 2003, the coalition forces (CF) faced the immediate challenge of creating new governance structures. After being briefed on the Local Governance Program's (LGP's) pilot project to establish neighborhood councils throughout the city of Baghdad that would serve as building blocks for a city council, U.S. Ambassador Bremer mandated the establishment of a Baghdad City Council by July 2003. The LGP worked with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and U.S. military civil affairs personnel to establish representative councils from the ground up to meet this goal and comply with the mandate.

Among the objectives of the U.S.-led CPA was the creation of democratic governance in Iraq at all government levels. In Baghdad, home to more than 4.5 million people, the CPA was immediately confronted with the need to restore basic services and establish structures that would serve both as an interface between Iraqis and the CPA and as a first step toward responsive and accountable governance. In this postconflict setting, the LGP faced the challenge of using limited resources to restore structures quickly among a citizenry with a traumatic legacy, little or no experience with democracy, and high ethnic and religious tensions. This brief describes the launch of councils in Baghdad and presents several lessons from the LGP experience.

The USAID/Iraq LGP, implemented by RTI International,* provided training, technical assistance, and other resources that included small grants to establish and strengthen local administrations, civic institutions, and processes in order to establish, develop, and strengthen a participatory, democratic, subnational government that delivers effective and efficient services to Iraqis. The LGP responded to specific challenges faced by subnational governments, democratic institutions and processes, and civil society organizations. The program sought to empower individuals and civic groups to have a say in setting local social and economic development and investment priorities through democratic participation and interactions with local government leaders. The LGP began in April 2003 and ended in May 2005.

*RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.

The early days: improvisational planning

When the first members of the LGP team arrived in Iraq in April 2003, the CPA had dismissed the governor of Baghdad Governorate and the mayor of the City of Baghdad. Senior Ba'ath Party officials had fled, and Iraqi civil servants in city hall were waiting to see what would happen and to receive instructions. The U.S.-led coalition's postwar planning had been focused on an anticipated humanitarian emergency that did not transpire, and the coalition had paid little attention to details concerning the democratization of Iraq and the challenge of getting government functional and operating. Coalition military forces found themselves confronted by Iraqi citizens demanding the restoration of electricity, sewerage, water, and security services. Meanwhile, a small team of military planners was struggling with establishing new national governance institutions for Iraq. One of the planners was tasked with addressing the question of municipal government in Baghdad. Throughout this time, the military was operating under the impression that large teams of civilian contractors would soon be arriving to assume responsibility for postcombat nation building.

The LGP team held extensive consultations and briefings with senior CPA civilian and military leadership in Baghdad to explain the program and its relationship to the CPA, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and to clarify expectations regarding the LGP's scope and level of effort. Despite the pressure for immediate action on governance issues, the organizational realities of interagency cooperation and competition, contract management, and program start-up could not be ignored.

The CPA largely improvised as it sought to initiate progress in the early days of postcombat Baghdad. Nevertheless, the LGP's first staff in Baghdad met several times with CPA (initially, Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, or ORHA) representatives, USAID staff, and the Baghdad City civil servants team led by Baghdad's deputy mayor. During these meetings, they developed the concept of using the neighborhoods to establish a council selection process that would be structured from the ground up. The LGP piloted the concept in a neighborhood in the middle-class Al Kindi District and the low-income Al Shula neighborhood. It was hoped that Iraqis participating in these pilots would be receptive to the concept of forming a neighborhood council and the selection of representatives from among themselves for a district council. The LGP then drafted a roll-out strategy.

Designing a council system for Baghdad

After arriving in Iraq, Ambassador Bremer announced the priority to establish a new city council in Baghdad by July 2003. The LGP had been working on council formation in the city since April 2003, but little background material was available about the city's functioning and the city council's role and responsibilities prior to the occupation. The LGP, USAID, and Department of State team learned that the previous city council had consisted of central government department heads (about two-thirds of the council membership) and members selected by national Ba'ath Party officials (the remaining one-third). The LGP, however, sought to develop a council that would represent the population, not the central government. Several Iraqi municipal staff who supported the idea of local councils were instrumental in providing information that enabled the council design process to move forward.

From a spatial planning point of view, Baghdad was organized along detailed grids. The city was divided into nine districts within which 88 neighborhoods were initially identified; later, another six neighborhoods were added to this list to accommodate the densely populated Sadr City. After determining that neighborhoods generally were ethnically and culturally homogenous, the LGP, USAID, and Department of State team decided, at least initially, to work within these spatial boundaries. The LGP worked with the military, the CPA, and Baghdad City municipal department heads to design a council system for the Baghdad metropolitan area. The group's efforts led to a design with three initial levels of councils: (1) neighborhood advisory councils (NACs), (2) district advisory councils (DACs), and (3) the Baghdad Interim City Council (ICC). Once the Baghdad ICC was formed, the Baghdad Regional Council and the Baghdad Provincial Council (for the governorate) were added.

In those early two months, the main concern was how to ensure that the city council would be as representative of the population as possible, considering that the council formation team did not have the extended time required to establish an electoral process, register voters, and hold city-wide elections. As a solution, the team decided to build up the city council by first holding town-hall-style gatherings in each neighborhood. At the initial town hall meeting, the LGP would explain the concept of a neighborhood council to serve as residents' representatives to the CF, the CPA, and the Baghdad City government—the *Amanat* (Baghdad mayoralty). After one or two additional meetings, attendees would elect the neighborhood council by secret ballot. Candidates could be self-nominated or nominated by others attending. Individuals not attending the meeting also could be nominated by meeting attendees. Candidates would then make brief speeches on why they should be elected. In some low-population-density neighborhoods, many of the adults in the neighborhood participated in these town meetings. In more densely populated neighborhoods, such as the low-income Al Sadr area, the city planning boundaries for neighborhoods contained hundreds of thousands of residents. This required further subdivision of the area into additional neighborhoods.

According to council formation team plans, once neighborhood councils were formed at these meetings, council members would then elect a subset of their membership to represent the neighborhood at the district level. (In the previous regime, districts had been responsible for specific service-delivery elements, including street lighting, street cleaning, and solid waste collection.) Once district councils were formed, they would elect subsets of their members to represent the district at the city level. Thus, members of the city council would all initially be members of a neighborhood council and a district council. A chain of representation from the neighborhood to the city level would connect the population to the citywide council for the first time in at least 30 years.

Several questions needed to be resolved in the course of designing the council system. One key question concerned the number of members needed for each council. If councils were too large, they risked being dysfunctional; if they were too small, they might not be representative in a meaningful way. The designers settled on proportional representation—based on population size—at the neighborhood and district levels, with a limit of three representatives per district to be chosen for the ICC. This design produced an ICC with 42 members, with a few members added to ensure minority representation. NACs varied in size from around 10 to 15 members, depending on population, and each NAC sent three to five representatives to the district councils. The number of members on the district council varied according to the number of neighborhoods in the district. Obtaining accurate population data was problematic because census data were old, the Oil-for-Food program data enumerated households and not individuals, and significant urban in-migration had occurred in recent months. Nonetheless, despite the data gaps, the proportionality principle guided NAC and DAC formation.

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Another key question concerned the representativeness of council members. Although democratic representation of neighborhoods and districts was the espoused principle, the CPA wanted council membership to be balanced and roughly representative of the ethnic and religious makeup of each neighborhood. To achieve this, the CPA placed certain limitations on membership. Council members could not be Ba'athists; councils were not to be dominated by a single ethnic, religious, or tribal group; and councils had to include women.

Other key questions concerned the council formation process and the councils' functions. The major issues in council formation were that the formation process could not be formal because the legal framework was in flux (the CPA had suspended the constitution), electoral rules and voter rolls were nonexistent, and neighborhood and district populations could not be accurately determined because no recent census had been conducted. Consequently, an informal process emerged that was based on democratic principles but fell short of a full-scale, representative democracy. The town hall meeting method, with two or three publicized meetings held before elections, emerged as the most preferable council election process.

Over time, the questions concerning council functions were answered. Prior to the LGP's involvement, the military had established the first councils in Iraq to function as liaisons with the local populations and to facilitate postcombat stability. In this function, councils also served as a conduit for communicating the needs, priorities, and concerns of the local population to the military. New councils formed through the council formation team's selection process continued to function as a communication conduit between the local population and Baghdad's municipal service departments and city administration, as well as with the civilian elements in the CPA. The NACs later expanded their role even more to include selecting and overseeing local projects, managing refurbished buildings that house council offices, vetting candidates for neighborhood jobs (e.g., security guards), and mobilizing community groups. Initially, the position of council member was conceived as a voluntary one, but later the CPA put a payment scheme in place. Plans to provide councils with budgets and spending and oversight authority were prepared but not implemented by the CPA.

Launching the council formation process

In view of the July 2003 deadline for establishing the ICC, the joint CPA-military-LGP team prepared a timeline for establishing the NACs and DACs that would form the institutional base for this council. After the design effort in the first week of May 2003, immediately following the official declaration of the end of hostilities, the council formation team consisted of one LGP staff member, an Iraqi-American professor recruited to return to her country of birth as a civil society specialist; one U.S. Army colonel, assigned to the CPA and with previous Middle East experience; and nine members of the Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council (IRDC), a council comprising members of the U.S.-Iraqi diaspora, hired by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), that were assigned one member per district. The council formation team initially relied on the CF to assemble Iraqi citizens for meetings about councils.

The council formation team's first meeting with Iraqi citizens to establish councils took place just outside the Green Zone in Al Kindi District, at the City Light Café, a local restaurant. Twenty-five men and three women attended. An LGP civil society specialist introduced the plan for establishing councils, and then the Iraqis peppered her with inquiries about the role of the councils, their legal and budgetary status, and how members would be selected. Answers to these questions were not available, because many issues had yet to be resolved. At times, discussions became tense and arguments broke out. After explaining what was at stake, the LGP civil society specialist gave her audience details about the nomination and selection process and invited attendees to pass the message to others in the neighborhood, consider who would be suitable candidates for nomination, and mobilize people to come to subsequent meetings. At the second meeting, approximately 50 citizens gathered, more discussion occurred, and several people nominated themselves and said a few words about why they wanted to be on the council. Fifty-five people attended the third meeting, and the selection process yielded 12 council members.

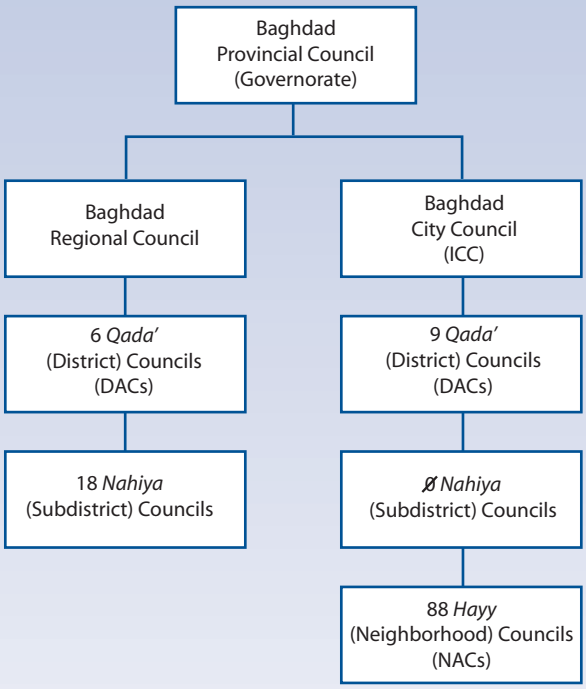
This *modus operandi* was replicated throughout the neighborhoods of Baghdad, with the council formation team, escorted by the military, passing out informational leaflets and holding caucus meetings and debates in parking lots, soccer stadiums, schools, and former Ba'ath Party buildings. Generally, council members were selected by the third meeting. Over the next couple of months, the LGP hired local Iraqi staff to assist with and increase the pace of NAC formation.

The newly formed NACs selected representatives to their DAC. The DACs then nominated and selected individuals to represent them on the ICC. The LGP used a quota system to add women to the DACs in order to avoid displacing men with women members. The LGP encouraged female council members to form women's committees in their neighborhoods to increase women's participation. Just as in the case of the ICC, each DAC established a Women and Children Committee. These committees conducted seminars and invited speakers to talk about and debate issues important to women, such as Resolution 137, which was proposed in a closed session by the CPA-constituted national Interim Governing Council (IGC). This resolution sought to impose *Shari'ah* (Muslim religious law) and regulate women's representation in the Transitional National Assembly.

Baghdad council results

In implementing program activities, the LGP and its many partners helped establish councils at the provincial (governorate) and lower levels; defined roles for these councils; assisted in legitimating them; trained members in council function; and created committee structures to enable councils to relate more easily with their constituents, hold open meetings, and seek citizen participation and input. By July 2003, 88 NACs, 9 DACs, and the Baghdad ICC had been formed.

Baghdad Council Hierarchy



To counter criticism that councils were insufficiently representative or contained undesirable Ba'athist elements, the CPA initiated a "refreshment" policy that sought to reconstitute the membership of some of the councils. This process began in December 2003 and was implemented to compensate for flaws in the selection mechanisms. By this time, the LGP had developed a relatively standardized procedure for council membership selections that ensured a greater degree of neighborhood participation, was generally perceived to be fair and open, and limited fraud. During this period, the LGP expanded the creation of councils beyond the city of Baghdad to include the outlying small towns and rural areas within the boundaries of Baghdad Governorate.[1] In February 2004, an interim provincial (governorate) council was formed. This council comprised representatives from the Baghdad ICC and from the DACs and *nawahi* (plural of *nahiya*) in the communities outside of the city limits. In total, 133 councils were formed, ranging from neighborhood to provincial (governorate) councils.

Once formed, the councils needed places to meet, training on how to organize themselves and conduct activities, and equipment. Using funds from the program's rapid-response grants, the LGP identified and refurbished buildings to house the DACs and NACs. All the DACs and 50 NACs were given office space and supplied with desks, chairs, and computers. LGP trainers provided workshops on skills in holding meetings, mobilizing the community, and identifying and formulating programs. Through its grant programs, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives also provided funds for meeting places and furnishings. From June 2003 to May 2004, the LGP trained more than 1,510 council members in parliamentary rules and procedures, the role of councils concerning service-delivery improvements, participatory strategic planning, and leadership.

More than 88 women were selected by their peers to serve as council members at all levels of the Baghdad council structure. The LGP trained women council members in computer skills and mentored them on the role of women council members in the protection of women's and children's rights in a democratic society. The LGP encouraged these women to take leading roles on council committees. The women council members also established 18 committees at each level—*nahiya* (subdistrict), *qada'* (district), city, regional, and provincial (governorate). In addition, the women's council members assumed an oversight role on gender-related issues. They encouraged and facilitated the formation of the Baghdad Women's Association, chaired by the Minister of Municipalities and Public Works. This women's association successfully stopped the signing of Resolution 137, which had been drafted by the national IGC.

Initially, citizens expressed much enthusiasm in participating on these councils. The NACs identified and prioritized their communities' needs and presented them to the DACs. Council members from different religious and ethnic backgrounds worked together for the common good. Citizens were eager and willing to learn about civil society and express themselves in meetings. The DACs coordinated with the *Amanat,* the CPA, and

[1] The Baghdad Municipality existed alongside Baghdad Governorate, complicating the development of councils. A Baghdad provincial council (for Baghdad Governorate) had not been established; however, a Baghdad municipal council was functioning independently of a provincial council. This had the effect of disenfranchising the rural and suburban areas of Baghdad Governorate, which had to depend on the City of Baghdad and the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works for service delivery. Solutions to this problem emerged during the refreshment period.

CF to address community needs. Although some needs were met, many were left unaddressed for lack of resources. Councils also played an oversight role and saw that services were delivered as promised. Several councils worked with the military to provide security for repaired structures. The councils also played a role in conflict resolution and served as community watch groups to ensure that insurgents did not enter their neighborhoods. In turn, citizens approached the councils to obtain papers and documents that would help in qualifying for CPA jobs and other positions.

With time, council members found their lack of authority and control over resources very frustrating. Because of the scarcity of jobs in Iraq, the introduction of stipends for serving on the council exacerbated political in-fighting. By the late fall of 2003, councils began to lose their credibility and legitimacy and were accused of being collaborators with the Americans. As the insurgency intensified and spread, council members became targets for intimidation and assassination.

To facilitate the effectiveness of councils, the LGP staff developed, tested, refined, and deployed various technical assistance and training materials. The LGP assisted in drawing up bylaws, writing codes of conduct, preparing rules of procedure, and drafting similar documents of procedure and principle. These were disseminated, discussed, and debated among council members; adapted by them; and used in conducting their business. Similarly, councils shared ideas, learned by doing, and became increasingly sophisticated and adept at achieving results, even when their very legitimacy was questioned and their ability to allocate resources was constrained. The LGP used the tested and refined bylaws and codes of conduct even after formal elections of provincial (governorate) councils in January 2005, as part of the basic training it provided to newly elected council members all across Iraq.

The LGP team facilitated the election of the three top executives—the governor and deputy governor of Baghdad Governorate and the *Amin* (mayor) of Baghdad City. The team also drafted the Provincial Charter, the Regional Charter, and the City Charter. Sadly, the first deputy governor of Baghdad was assassinated in November 2004, and the governor was assassinated in January 2005. The LGP staff worked with the Regional Council and the Provincial (Governorate) Council in the selection of a new governor and deputy governor in January 2005. Courageous Iraqis continued to step forward for public service despite the danger.

The January 30, 2005, elections resulted in the replacement of 48 of the 51 members of the Baghdad Provincial Council. The Council Charter that had been developed by the LGP was distributed to the new members. The LGP developed 12 council training sessions, which new council members received at the LGP facility at the Marble Hotel. Training topics included council procedures, sources of authority, council-executive relations, mechanisms of citizen input, and a code of conduct.

Lessons

It is difficult to extract lessons related to LGP's council formation experience from some of the larger policy issues related to the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq. Based on RTI's experience in other countries, the LGP sought to incorporate "best practices" when developing local governance structures in Baghdad and throughout the rest of Iraq. Establishing councils was an integral element in the CPA's plans for democratizing Iraq, yet the LGP's ability to do so was circumscribed by (1) the demands of the CPA for speed and quick results, which limited some of the groundwork that would have been desirable; (2) the association of the LGP with U.S. policy, which led to suspicion and lack of trust by Iraqis; and (3) the subsequent deteriorating security situation, which placed those Iraqis willing to cooperate in the council formation process at risk for their safety.

Working with the military

The LGP's council formation experience confirms a key lesson of other nation-building efforts about the need to establish clear expectations with the military on roles and responsibilities as a necessary step for coordination and cooperation. Initially, the military anticipated that the LGP would take over full responsibility for handling local governance and was unaware of the scope of work contained in the USAID contract for the LGP. However, the success of the LGP's efforts to establish councils significantly depended on collaboration with military units. The CF's Government Support Teams (GSTs) were very much involved in the formation and housing of NACs and DACs and provided security during NAC and DAC selection meetings. However, because the military secured buildings that had been identified for DAC and NAC use, its presence made the councils a target for insurgents. The military's civil affairs officers were also integral to helping councils operate effectively in cooperation with the troops assigned to their Baghdad neighborhoods. Because of their day-to-day interactions with Iraqi citizens, these military personnel appreciated the role and relevance of the LGP's work with the councils.

Working with the diasporas

The LGP worked closely with members of the IRDC, particularly during the early period of Baghdad's council formation, when few program staff were deployed to Iraq. The IRDC were members of the U.S. Iraqi diaspora who had been recruited by the U.S. DOD to assist the CPA in reconstruction. They primarily comprised Chaldean and Assyrian Christians and Shi'a Muslims. The CPA tried to match IRDC individuals with specific districts (mainly at the DAC level), by placing a Shi'a IRDC member in a predominantly Shi'a district, for example. In the early phase of the program, the LGP depended on IRDC members assigned to Baghdad's nine districts to help mobilize citizens to come to neighborhood and district council selection meetings.

Selecting council members

Because of the urgency to establish councils and get them operating, the military's vetting of candidates was necessarily hurried. Later, this haste imposed costs in terms of the perceived legitimacy of council members. It was difficult to identify the undesirable Ba'athist Party members, because party membership had been mandatory for almost all types of professional positions. CF and LGP staff had to rely on ad hoc assessments of who was a "good" or "bad" party member. The refreshment process put in place by the CPA sought to retrofit councils with more popularly selected members and to avert Iraqi criticism of council formation.

Recognizing the importance of local knowledge and understanding

As with much of the postconflict planning in Iraq, knowledge gaps of the institutions and prevailing conditions prior to the occupation hampered the council development process. For example, councils had existed in Iraq since the 1960s, but they had been instruments of central government control rather than representatives for citizens at the local level. Better knowledge of preexisting local council structures could have been helpful in both planning and implementing council development. Such knowledge would have enabled the LGP to clarify at the outset the differences in the roles and responsibilities between the new and the old councils.

Balancing the tension between long-term and immediate objectives

The stated long-term objective of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was to put in place the institutions that would lead to a democratic state in the Middle East. However, the immediate objective was to restore stability and maintain control in view of the sociopolitical forces that had been unleashed by the invasion and subsequent collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. The LGP was charged with helping to establish Baghdad's councils as building blocks of local democracy, thus contributing to the long-term objective. Yet in the interests of stability and control, the CPA placed significant limits on the boundaries of local discretion within the context of the immediate objective. The CPA wanted the councils to reflect balanced representation and membership. Consequently, CPA directives ran counter to the desires of local neighborhoods in some instances. On occasion, Iraqis raised this issue with LGP staff, but the program was not in a position to respond.

Building trust

Intervening in local neighborhoods requires trust and cultural sensitivity. Iraqi-Americans who spoke the language, understood the culture, and shared Iraqis' concerns with rebuilding their capital and their country were key to the LGP's progress in council formation. The LGP's reliance on local Iraqi staff and expatriates with in-depth experience in and knowledge of the Middle East and Iraq was a critical success factor. However, popular suspicion about the motives of LGP staff and of the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq, particularly in such poor areas of Baghdad as Sadr City, affected the ability of some councils to operate effectively.

Assigning resources to the councils

The failure to assign resources to the councils contributed to their perceived ineffectiveness and lack of legitimacy in the eyes of Baghdad's citizens. Channeling reconstruction funds through DACs and NACs to provide employment opportunities could have counteracted this perception. In the opinion of some observers, these employment opportunities could have lessened the chances of insurgency, particularly in the poorer neighborhoods. Addressing the council resources issue thus relates to the broader framework for the decentralization of local government.

Creating Representative Councils in Baghdad was written by Derick W. Brinkerhoff and Samuel Taddesse, based on LGP program documents; interviews with Amal Rassam, the LGP-Baghdad civil society specialist; and the authors' experience in Iraq. Ronald Johnson provided additional input and helpful comments.

Lessons Learned Briefs are intended to document experience and lessons learned from RTI's projects in international development. The series on the Iraq LGP examines the program's efforts to strengthen the local governance in Iraq and presents lessons that may be applicable to other interventions in failed states and postconflict societies. The views expressed in the briefs are solely those of the authors and should not be attributed to USAID or RTI International. The *Lessons Learned Brief* series editors are Derick W. Brinkerhoff and Samuel Taddesse.

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